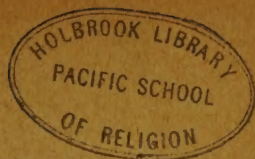


The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



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DEAR MEMBER,

Information has reached this country from a trustworthy source on the Continent giving the substance of reports received about religious conditions in occupied Russia.

RELIGION IN OCCUPIED RUSSIA

The reports are in many respects contradictory. They agree, however, on one point, namely, that a far larger proportion of the Russian people than anyone expected maintain their attachment to the Orthodox Church. Wherever Churches have been allowed to be opened large numbers have come to the services. There is a great demand for priests to baptize children and consecrate marriages. The anti-religious propaganda does not yet seem to have touched the people deeply, and there are few signs of any deep-seated hostility to the Church. There is, on the other hand, a widespread ignorance of Christianity among youth.

There are conflicting reports about the attitude of the German authorities. Some reports speak of official collaboration in the reopening of cathedrals and the encouragement of Christian activities; others tell of severe restrictions on Church services and of the removal of the ikons for use as metal for war purposes. These differences of treatment appear to be due partly to the different attitudes of the army and the Party. A good many officers in the army are sympathetic towards the Church, while the Party regard it solely from the point of view of its political usefulness. If it can be used as a weapon against Communism they are prepared to favour it.

CHRISTIANITY IN GERMANY

There has recently taken place a trial of a group of pastors and lay leaders of the Confessional Church in Germany. The proceedings showed that the spirit of the Church is not broken. The sentences were relatively mild. But in spite of this the outlook for the Church is dark. Recent documents issued by the Party show that it is more than ever determined on the destruction of the Church as an influence in the nation. Martin Bormann, the successor of Rudolf Hess, has stated that National-Socialism and Christianity are absolutely irreconcilable, and that the Party has consequently given up the idea of forming a united Reich Church and adopted the policy of weakening the Church as much as possible. "The people," he says, "must be liberated from the Churches and their organs, the pastors. It is the interest of the Reich not to overcome, but rather to maintain and intensify the divisions of the Church."

The battle is openly joined between the universal claims of Christianity and the exclusive claims of tribalism. The Nazis see clearly what is involved, if Christians are as yet not fully alive to it. The issue is put plainly in a pamphlet by Friedrich Schmidt, *Das Reich als Aufgabe* (The Reich as a Task), issued with the official approval of the Party:

"At the beginning of European history, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the idea of the Universal Church, as the idea of a community which has to stand above the nations of the world, spread abroad in Europe. This Church, as the spokesman of Christianity, recognized no specific qualities in nations and men. It declared that the bonds which tie man to the laws of life are bonds of the second order, subordinate to those spiritual and psychological bonds in which all men on earth acknowledged Christianity or were forced to acknowledge it.

"I am not unaware of the fact that those powers which have taken into their protection the imaginary things of life and also claim to possess access to the beyond cannot be rooted out of the spiritual life of our nation in a single day. We must continually work with gigantic patience and equally gigantic caution until the men in our Reich finally recognize in its true significance the natural, and accordingly divine, superiority of membership in a nation to the arbitrarily selected membership in a confession. If there is a community, membership in which cannot be determined by human will, but is bound to an inviolable divine law, then this community is the most valuable, most moral, and therefore ultimately the only religious community. Therefore for us membership in our nation is a highest divine and moral reality. Whoever lives for his nation, in complete devotion and deepest faithfulness, is according to human estimate truly living in God. But anyone who is so irreverent as to deny the law of the blood is the most glib being that moves on the face of the earth.

"In this sense, we are to-day seeking to overcome the spiritual and psychological principles of the last two millenia, to revolutionize the European continent as a Germanic continent, and to stabilize and perfect it as a bulwark of the new idea of National-Socialism."

THE CHURCH IN HOLLAND

The conflict between Christian universalism and the deification of the nation or race has reached an acute stage also in the occupied countries. The attitude of the Church to its members of Jewish origin has become a major issue in Holland. Several Christian associations have dissolved themselves rather than accept the new decree that persons of non-Aryan origin can be members only of purely Jewish organizations. Outstanding among these is the Dutch Student Christian Movement, which during the forty-six years of its existence has played a leading part in the World Student Christian Federation. After efforts to secure reconsideration of the decree had failed, it was decided to bring the association to an end rather than to continue it in a form which would be a denial of the truth for which it stood. The decision was taken as a final act of witness to the nature of the universal Church and the truth of the Gospel of Christ. (It may be noted that in France also the Christian youth movements have taken a decided stand in refusing to discriminate against their Jewish and foreign members.)

A unique event in the history of the Church in Holland is a united approach to the authorities by the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. They presented a common protest against perversions of law and justice, arrests and imprisonment without trial, the deportation, resulting in many deaths, of large numbers of Jews, and the attempt to impose Nazi ideas on the people of Holland.

WHAT MEAN YE BY THESE WORDS?

I have always conceived of the News-Letter as an effort of co-operative thinking. It owes more than can be measured to the friends who give their help unstintedly when I ask for it and to those who spontaneously write letters of valuable comment, e.g. the letter from the Principal of a university published four weeks ago, and the following letter prompted by it from Miss Dorothy L. Sayers:—

The letter from the Principal of a university raises the very point which the layman like myself has to deal with when trying to explain Christian doctrine to popular audiences. There are several things we have to bear in mind.

1. The common man's attitude to words and language is, in general, quite uncritical—owing largely to lack of training in the "humanities." He has not accustomed himself to look out for variations in the meaning of a word produced by (a) passage of time, (b) difference of

context, (c) accretions of mental association, nor can he distinguish between the direct and the metaphorical use of language. He is influenced by the mental attitude of scientists, who are always trying to use words as they use mathematical or chemical symbols, i.e. "one word—one meaning," wherever it occurs; and who are becoming increasingly bothered by the fluid nature of ordinary speech. Because of this, he is very much at the mercy of slogans and catch-words, supposing that if you make the noise "democracy," "equality," "salvation," or what not, it is going to mean the same thing, whatever the context, or whatever the mental attitude behind it.

2. On the other hand, the common man has quite lost sight of the fact that theology is a science, with a technical vocabulary of its own. He is not to blame, because nobody ever tells him this. For instance, the words "person," "substance," "incomprehensible," "grace," etc., have technical theological meanings as exact and limited as the technical meanings of the words "energy," "power," "force," etc. in physics, and quite as remote from their current or poetical use.

3. The clamour to have theological language "brought up to date" takes no account of the fact that the changes in language go on continually. Nobody can peg down *current speech* to a fixed set of meanings; and if such a thing were possible, language would become dead. Moreover, if all theological language were modernized, there would be a violent break of continuity between past and present. The language of the Fathers, and even of the Bible, would seem even more remote and unintelligible than it does now.

4. There is no reason whatever why the common man should not learn the *technical vocabulary* of theology. He finds no difficulty in learning the technology of other sciences. What he needs is (a) to be told that certain terms are technical, (b) to have the technical use of the terms explained to him, (c) to be warned about confusing the technical use with the current use (a thing in which he finds no great difficulty when dealing with, e.g. engineering or electrical science).

5. Theologians and ecclesiastics should learn to keep an eye on this matter themselves, and watch for the moments when their technical terms are liable to be misconstrued by the common man taking them in the current sense. (You would not, for instance, suppose it possible for a Christian apologist and a scientist to correspond angrily for weeks about transubstantiation without discovering that the word "substance" meant to the one the precise opposite of what it did to the other—yet this has happened).

6. Theologians and ecclesiastics should make intelligent use of the kind of layman who is trained in the current and poetic use of words. These are the people who can interpret theology to the common man, and clear up ambiguities. (How often have I heard a preacher going on and on using some theological expression or other, and known in my bones that his hearers were taking it in a totally different sense, and that there was going to be the most frightful misunderstanding in about five seconds if he didn't define his terms!) It should also be the business of the theologian to remember what the layman is trying to do, and not slate him for heresy when he is only using a different vocabulary. (For instance, it's quite all right to say that *non posse peccare* (not to be able to sin) is better than *posse non peccare* (to be able not to sin), if you know what, theologically, *non posse* means. For the ordinary man, it just means incapacity resulting from outside pressure or inward defect; and if you say flatly "Christ could not sin," you merely give him the idea of a sort of automaton. You've got to explain the difference between "I can't get out" said the starling, and "Father, I cannot tell a lie.")

7. However it is done, it must be made clear to people that theological language is intended to *mean something*—that it is not "just an abstraction," but an abstraction from experience; that it is intended to indicate a reality to which the observables correspond. I wish I could make clear how unrelated to anything the basic Christian dogmas appear to the common man. It's not that they are difficult or even that they are unintelligible, but that they aren't expected to have any relevance. We are all quite accustomed to seeing an explanation about physics go off into a perfectly incomprehensible algebraical equation. That doesn't worry us, because we implicitly believe that the thing is intended to return to earth again and show a result in eggs or atoms or cog-wheels or stresses or electrical circuits or something. But for the common man, religion goes off into theology and *stays there*. He doesn't think it's expected or even intended to come back in any apprehensible result. That, I think, is one reason why he compares it so unfavourably with the sciences he knows more about.

8. This is my last point (you will be pleased to see). Children leave school with or without any very profound knowledge of, say, mathematics or Shakespeare's poetry. But none of them leaves under the impression that there is nothing further in these subjects to occupy an adult mind. But where Christian doctrine is concerned, they do seem to get the idea that it's something you learn at your mother's knee—after which you can go on to grown-up subjects. Then, when people are older or a war comes, they have nothing but that childish apprehension of doctrine to fall back upon, if they want to interpret events. We've overdone the "little children" business. Christ never said people were to suffer from arrested mental development; He said that *grown* people, with adult minds, must learn to *become* as little children—and added that it was a very difficult thing to do.

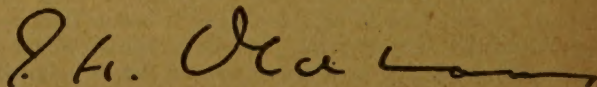
THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

You will not anywhere get better value for threepence than in Mr. Christopher Dawson's pamphlet *The Sword of the Spirit*¹; its contents are indeed beyond price. No one that I know has understood more deeply the spiritual crisis of to-day. Mr. Dawson sees that we have to "arm ourselves for a spiritual conflict with organized forces of evil, which are not merely material or human, but are themselves spiritual, 'world rulers of darkness,' whose subtle and violent attack overwhelms the fragile barriers of a human order and civilization which has denied their very existence." The only power that can overcome this tremendous reality of evil is the power of the Spirit.

"God not only rules history, He intervenes as an actor in history, and the mystery of the Divine Passion which we celebrate in Holy Week is the key to His creative action. For the Kingship of Christ and His authority over the nations are not pious phrases: they are principles of revolutionary importance for the political as well as the moral order. As Newman wrote a hundred years ago: 'Christ's religion was not a mere creed or philosophy. A creed or a philosophy need not have interfered with kingdoms of this world; but might have existed under the Roman Empire or under the Persian. No; Christ's kingdom was a counter kingdom. It occupied ground.'"

Here, in belief in the Spirit as an active power in human life, is the point on which everything hinges—the ultimate challenge, the ultimate decision. Mr. Dawson is right in his unwearied insistence that this is the fundamental issue. The one thing that can redeem the situation from meaninglessness, restore courage and kindle hope is faith in a living God, stronger than every concentration of material and human power, who meets us in every situation, asks us to trust Him, lays on us tasks, entrusts us with a mission. The unique contribution of the Old and the New Testaments is that they find the key to reality in personal relations. Real life is meeting. In the recovery of that knowledge lies the only hope for mankind.

Yours sincerely,



¹ Sands, 15 King Street, London, W.C. 2.

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